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ABSTRACT

Invisible writing is a technique whereby the composer writes with an empty ballpoint pen on a blank piece of paper backed by a piece of carbon paper and a bottom blank sheet. An informal experiment in which graduate students used the invisible writing technique was conducted to replicate earlier studies indicating that invisible writing is uncomfortable because it does not allow writers to pause and reread what they have written. Results of the new experiment, however, revealed that the students wrote competently and enthusiastically at first and reported that the blank paper forced them to concentrate on their work more. More formal experiments with over 100 inservice and preservice teachers as subjects were later conducted with similar results; both objective measures and self-reports indicated that invisible writing helps writers focus on the task at hand. These results suggest that invisible writing could be a promising form of classroom therapy to help writers improve the quality of their thinking as they compose. Research has revealed that less successful writers need to learn to focus their attention on writing rather than on inflexibly applying rules about the appearance of their work and rereading constantly. Invisible writing may be the best form of therapy for eliminating rereading and forcing unskilled writers to forge ahead in coherent continuous discourse. (SKC)

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Paper presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (New Orleans, LA, March 13-15, 1986)

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Freeing Attention and Focusing Concentration Through Invisible Writing: An Experimental Mode of Free Writing

In this paper I want to address two related topics. First, I want to describe some results obtained from my experiments with a somewhat unnatural procedure for composing that I call "invisible writing"--a procedure closely related to free-writing. Then I want to reflect on what such techniques as invisible writing and free-writing may suggest about teaching students to improve the quality of their thinking.

Invisible writing is the name I gave in a 1983 CCC article to an experimental procedure I borrowed from James Britton (1975). In invisible writing the writer writes with an empty ballpoint pen on a blank piece of paper backed by a piece of carbon paper and a bottom blank sheet. That way, the writer can't see what he is writing as he writes, but still produces a carbon copy of everything he has written. Britton and his colleagues at the London Institute of Education invented the method to test what would happen to them if they couldn't reread what they had written while they were engaged in the composing process. They were interested in such a test because they had noticed from observing student writers and others that one of the most persistent features of the composing process is the movement of scanning, whereby a writer actively engaged in writing pauses at intervals to re-read what he has written, before proceeding further in his composition. Their experiment on themselves helped

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to confirm their view that re-reading is an indispensable feature of the composing process for all writers and for all but the most cognitively simple writing tasks.

Here is what Britton and his colleagues have to say about their experience as experimental subjects:

> We were acutely uncomfortable. When we wrote letters to an absent member of the team about what we were doing, and when we reported recent experiences in a straightforward narrative, we were able to complete the task with only a few blunders; but when we tried to formulate theoretical principles, even on a topic very familiar to us all, and when we tried to write poems, we were defeated. We just could not hold the thread of an argument or the shape of a poem in our minds, because scanning back was impossible. As we expected, the carbon copies showed many inconsistencies and logical and syntactical discontinuities. They were, in fact, useless. (p. 35)

Subsequent studies of the composing process have tended to reify the conclusion of the London research team. Sharon Pianko (1979) found that skilled college freshmen paused in composing to re-read parts of their progressing compositions on an average of every 30-40 words or every 3-4 minutes. In post-composing interviews these writers said that re-reading was part of the way they planned ahead. They read back in order to formulate what they wanted to say next.

Since all of us who write can see for ourselves how necessary it is for us to be able to read back over parts of our discourse as we proceed, no one had thought to challenge Britton's findings or his claim that re-reading is indispensable to composing. Neither did I.

I did set out, however, to replicate Britton's experiment some time ago with a group of graduate students (all prospective composition teachers) so we could see for ourselves how re-reading is crucial to composing, particularly as we engage in

higher level thinking tasks. Unfortunately or fortunately my lesson didn't demonstrate what it was supposed to.

At first to my embarrassment and then to my amazement my students, using empty ballpoint pens and carbon paper, wrote competently and with increasing enthusiasm even as they progressed along a sequence of increasingly difficult writing assignments. Several of them reported that the constraints of the invisible writing procedure actually enhanced their fluency and spurred their creativity. The invisibility of the text seemed to force them to give more concentrated and sustained attention to their emerging thoughts than they usually gave when writing. This was especially true for writers who reported that their customary practice in writing was to allow their attention to wander from their task frequently during composing. Such students ordinarily had a difficult time keeping themselves focused on a single train of thought beyond the limit of a few sentences.

Some students noted that their usual pattern in composing was to interrupt the flow of their thought frequently to edit and amend the language or mechanics of their developing text. The experiment suggested to them that their usual pauses impeded their fluency and, more importantly, diluted their concentration. Under the experimental conditions they could neither edit, nor re-write, nor allow their attention to stray from the line of thought they were developing. They could, of course, pause in invisible writing, but even during pauses the writer must keep his pen poised on the spot where he stops, and, more crucially, keep his mind engaged directly with the gist of the idea he has been developing, even as he plans ahead or mentally reaches back to where he has been.

Sparked by such surprising accidental findings, I soon turned my failed demonstration into a formal experiment--one that I have refined and repeated with over 100 inservice and preservice teachers and with an equal number of college freshmen--generally with the same results. I have also received informal reports of similar results

from teachers who participated in my experiment and then adapted it to their own instructional use, particularly in teaching composition to students who were working on word processors. Working at a computer you don't need an empty ballpoint pen or carbon paper to write invisibly; all you have to do is turn off your screen. My findings and those reported to me by others have generally been based on experiments calling for 10-30 minutes of invisible writing.

The more formal experiment I have been conducting is essentially a refinement of Britton's and my own earlier informal one. It asks writers to compose using the invisible writing procedure on a series of topics each of which represents a more cognitively demanding writing task than the one before it. I measure the cognitive demand of each topic on a scale based on James Moffett's (1968) developmental schema for classifying and calibrating the intellectual demands of various discourse types. According to Moffett, intellectual development may be described as a process of decentering--outward in perspective away from one's own sensory perceptions in the here and now, and upward in abstractiveness away from the fragmentary data of isolated experiences. The sequence of topics I assign, therefore, progresses along a set of steps marked by Moffett's tag phrases for identifying kinds of discourse (what is happening, what happened, what happens, what should happen). It may also be seen as progressing through a series of discourse types from describing to reporting to generalizing to speculating or persuading. (See appendix)

As in my unplanned experiment, the invisible writing experiments I have conducted over the past couple of years suggest that for many writers the constraints of the experimental condition serve to enhance rather than impede their capacity to compose fluent, perceptive, and creatively thoughtful written discourse. Even more surprising is the evidence based on self-reports that many writers find the invisible writing procedure increasingly helpful to them as they move up the scale of discourse types

to engage in the more cognitively demanding tasks. That is the reverse of what we might expect and of what Britton reports.

The explanation, I think, is that the invisibly composing writer, unable to look back on a trail of words to mark the progress of his thought on a topic, must hold the gist of his progressing thought in mind all the time as he writes and even as he pauses in his writing. This extra burden on his memory may force him to pay closer attention to his ideas as they emerge, and to sustain his concentration for a longer period of time than he may ordinarily demand of himself. It seems then, that the invisible writing procedure may feel most helpful to writers as they take on the most intellectually difficult tasks because such tasks require of them their most focused and sustained attention--and focused and sustained attention are precisely what invisible writing seems to enhance.

This brings me to my second topic--one that deals more with classroom practices and perhaps educational politics than with composing process theory. For insofar as we may say that writing is thinking, invisible writing appears to be a promising form of classroom therapy--or perhaps a prosthesis--for helping writers improve the quality of their thinking as they engage in composing, at least in the first draft stage. The ways in which invisible writing enhances thinking, moreover, appear to identify it closely with free writing as an instructional technique. And this means that writing teachers have in their repertoire of teaching techniques at least two answers to the current call for instructional methods designed to improve the quality of student thinking.

If we are not likely to put forth such techniques as answers to that call, it is probably because we are quite properly suspicious about what is being asked of us when the educational community clamors for methods to teach "thinking skills" (whatever they are) or even "critical thinking." It is ironic but not surprising that many of us find ourselves as composition teachers in the awkward position of arguing

for the privilleged status of our discipline on the grounds that it improves the thinking of our students, while we simultaneously remain cool or heatedly hostile to any attempts to introduce anything like instruction in thinking skills into the English or language arts curriculum. I want to take the remainder of my time in this paper to talk about why I think we are correct in opposing instruction in thinking skills and why I would at the same time encourage the use of techniques such as free writing and invisible writing as methods for helping students to improve the quality of their thinking.

The problem most of us have with techniques for improving thinking, I suspect, is that we realize (as thinking skills advocates appear not to) that no technique or method for thinking is useful except to the degree that it is employed by a mind that is already actively engaged in thought. Thus while we may welcome the availability of, say, an heuristic device as an aid to invention in trying to figure out what we might want to say on a topic, we also know that any heuristic--even the simple set of questions: who, what, when, where, why, how--ceases to be an aid to thinking when it becomes a substitute for thought. When it does, we get the product of an algorithm--formulaic, perfunctory thought, a parody of thinking.

The problem of how to improve the quality of our students' thinking is not subject to solution by direct methods of instruction for the simple reason noted by Dewey when he observed that there is no method for thinking; thinking IS the method. That is why any method we teach is useful only insofar as it is employed by someone who is already thinking. When the method becomes the substitute for thought, we get, as I have suggested, parodic thinking and not the real thing.

Yet knowing this, suggests that we know at least something about how thinking works and therefore about methods--if not for thinking, then at least for obstructing or perverting thought. In fact, it doesn't take a radically cynical observer of educational practices to conclude that the purpose of schooling is to provide students

with a complete repertoire of "skills" designed to prevent the occurence of any genuine thinking.

Cynicism aside, I believe it is quite literally the case that while we know no method for thinking we know a good deal about what obstructs or misdirects thought and that it is precisely this sort of knowledge that accounts for some of the most effective instructional techniques--including free writing--that expert composition teachers employ to help their students produce more thoughtful--which is to say, more perceptive, focused, original, and insightful written discourse. That is to say, many of the most effective techniques for teaching writing--most notably free-writing (and its invisible variant)--are largely methods for removing the obstacles that obstruct or impede a writer's thinking.

Moreover, our intuition that this is the sort of instruction most needed by our students is authoritatively confirmed by a substantial body of research examining the composing processes and behaviors of skilled writers as compared to poor writers. That research (with a few exceptions) tells us less about what good writers know in the way of skill that allows them to write effectively than it does about the various forms of self-sabatoge, false knowledge, and school-skilled behavior that prevent poor writers from activating their fullest intelligence in the service of their discourse. Mike Rose (1980) has shown us in his study of blocked and unblocked university writers, for example, that only blocked writers seem to have learned what they were taught about how to write. The most competent writers he studied seemed so unable to tell him how you are supposed to go about producing an essay as to suggest that they didn't know how to do it. But the blocked writers characteristically knew how it was supposed to be done. And they were blocked because they insisted on doing it just that way. (Does this help to explain why it is always the worst writers in our classes who are most certain--and most mistaken--about what it is that we are supposed to be teaching them?) What Rose found, in any event, was that it was

the blocked writers' knowledge of what they were supposed to do (start with a lively opening, end with a bang, have five paragraphs, have three main points and so on) and their inflexibility in applying these rules that constituted the greatest obstructions to their thinking and writing as they composed.

Sandra Perl (1980) found similarly obstructed cognitive processes in the composing behavior of unskilled college writers who seemed to give most of their attention in the first stages of drafting an essay to how their teachers were going to correct their errors. Such writers, she found, paused so frequently during their composing to edit and correct the surface features of their text that they were unable to give any sustained attention to the development of their ideas. Similarly, Annette Schneider (1985) has reported that unskilled writers pause in their composing to re-read their emerging text at least five times as frequently as do skilled writers.

I have cited these studies of student's composing processes to underscore my claim that while it may be the case, as Dewey insists, that there is no method for thinking, there are a number of methods for obstructing thought. Moreover, the process of writing, quite aside from the effects of instruction, seems to tempt writers to employ all of them. We must not become so numbed by our own educational propaganda about how writing is an instrument for the improvement of thinking (although it is) to forget the irony of the fact that the act of writing is itself one of the principle obstacles to focused and productive thinking for many writers--novice and experienced alike. What invisible writing and free-writing offer us are techniques for overcoming the principle impediments to thinking that are posed for most of us by the task of having to produce written discourse. That is to say, they offer us an opportunity to engage in an extended process of thinking and to retain a record of that process as written discourse without being subject to the self-consciousness or division of our attention that occurs when a writer seems to monitor his language at the point of utterance.

Let me distinguish here between monitoring one's language and auditing one's thought. The invisibly composing writer in having to retain in memory an ongoing sense of the gist of his emerging thought retains his capacity to amplify and modify his thought as it emerges--to grow his thoughts. But because he cannot see what he is writing--because he is, as it were, deaf to his own voice, he is not in danger of experiencing the loss of focus that results from paying attention not to the gist of a meaning but to how it sounds--do I sound smart enough, literate enough, sufficiently correct and so on. In other words, in writing invisibly (or freely) the writer is free to think without the constraints of audience, register, and convention that can divide a writer's attention and make writing itself a performance block which can obstruct the thinking of the writer.

But, of course, even techniques as liberating as free writing or invisible writing can become constraints which themselves distract writers and divide their attention between the making of meaning and the instrument for making it. The principal peril in invisible writing, for example, is that it can easily produce a psychological effect that is the opposite of the one it is intended to produce. It is intended as a way of reducing self-consciousness and relieving a writer of some of the constraints that might distract his thinking while he composes. However, this experimental constraint--the writer's inability to see what he is writing--can be so distracting as to become itself a serious impediment to his thinking and to his writing. Such a response has been rare among the adult and experienced student writers I have tested, but has been noted frequently by teachers who have experimented with invisible writing with basic writers. Oddly enough, as Glynda Hull and William Smith (1983) have shown, even for basic writers, invisible writing does not seriously impair their capacity (however limited already) to produce syntactically and mechanically correct prose. The experimental procedure does take its toll, however, on their capacity

to generate continuous connected discourse--to develop ideas and to connect the parts of their discourse in a logical progression.

The difficulty that many unskilled writers seem to experience with invisible writing may derive, as Margaret Atwell's (1981) experiments have suggested to her, from their tendency to produce discourse with a very local focus of attention, with little sense of a text-level plan or any intermediate mental scheme that might guide their thinking. The fact that unskilled writers in their composing tend to reread (on the average) after every four or five words, compared to 30 or 40 words for skilled writers, suggests that poor writers compose without much of a sense of where they are going--without the kind of tacit or felt sense of an idea waiting to be discovered that guides more skilled writers. Unskilled writers seem to compose instead by constantly consulting what they have just said as the only basis for what they will say next. Deprived of the ability to reread what they have just written, they seem to have no resources for forging ahead in coherent continuous discourse.

If this is an accurate description of the problem that unskilled writers experience with invisible writing, it's not clear to me whether we want to abandon the technique in working with them or use it relentlessly as a form of therapy that may force them to begin to do the kind of thinking that is required for any sort of intellectually useful discourse.

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CCCC

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Scale of Intellectual Ascent for Discourse

PERSPECTIVE	DISCOURSE ACTS	INFORMING FACULTIES	EXAMPLES
What is happening	describing recording	discourse organized by the senses	field notes love notes diary entries
What happened (or will happen)	reporting narrating (or planning)	discourse organized by memory (chronological thinking)	memoirs news reports summaries of field notes plans
What happens	generalizing (using examples) explaining analyzing classifying advising from experience	discourse organized by analogical reasoning—the capacity to recognize a basis for excluding and including instances into classes and categories; i.e., generalizations	history scientific inquiry and explanation literary analysis prudential wisdom
What might happen What should happen	arguing (using reasons) advising from theory speculating theorizing disputing	discourse organized by the formal logic of argument or by the "tautologic" that generates new theoretical frameworks yielding new perspectives and arguments	professional advice and speculation literary theory philosophical and scientific theories and proofs legal argumentation

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A Sequence of Writing Tasks (Do one in each category):

Task I (5 minutes) What is happening

A. Write an account of what's going on right now around you or within you.

B. Write a note to someone expressing your love, anger, disappointment, resentment, or appreciation.

C. Write a diary entry focusing on a fear, hope, or regret.

Task II (7 minutes) What happened (or will happen)

A. Write a brief memoir of a childhood romance or about some other childhood experience.

B. Tell about a fight you had with someone close to you.

C. Tell about some plan you have for the immediate or distant future.

D. Write a report on a recent professional activity you participated in; e.g., a class you taught, a workshop you conducted, a meeting you attended.

Task III (10 minutes) What happens (or should happen)

Select a topic from A or B

A. Give advice to someone about to do one of the following:

1. Get married/begin a relationship
2. Get divorced/end a relationship
3. Become a teacher
4. Become a parent
5. Begin anything you know about

B. Write on one of the following topics:

1. The benefits and dangers of daydreaming
2. The wisdom and folly of reflecting on the past
3. How we can hate the ones we most love
4. What many people want from a relationship is what no one can ever give them
5. The problems of student-writers

Task IV (7 minutes) Write a poem.

Writing Samples from the Invisible Writing Experiment

Becoming a Parent

Becoming a parent involves more risk than anything I know of. You do not know if you're succeeding or failing until it's too late to correct the mistakes. Often your role must be negative with virtually no positive feedback. Appreciation is non-existent all during the hard work phase. For many years you will be devoid of independence. Pie some will say. It's not that bad. Think again. Until the child is independent, your life is not your own. Sure, you may have time away, but only if the babysitting arrangements work. If the babysitter gets sick who is responsible? You!

Not only does parenting require risk and responsibility, it lays tremendous loads of guilt on your shoulders. If something goes wrong, society and THE EXPERTS agree that it's due to faulty parenting. Everyone knows that the damage begins while the child is in the womb. The mother's eating, drinking, etc., influences the child. The more we learn about parenting, the heavier the guilt. Soon we'll need saints instead of parents.

Daydreaming

Daydreaming can serve a variety of purposes. When one is "understimulated" by the present surroundings, daydreaming can provide creative fantasy and rewarding escape. Daydreaming can also be a time of self-integration, a time to reflect on past experiences and plans for the future. When my oldest son was 6 and 7, he spent a great deal of time daydreaming--often not being able to finish assignments in class. His worst problem was in working on reading comprehension worksheets as homework. He would agonize for hours, sometimes on a single question. In talking with (illegible). I never knew if I was asking him to do something which was less important than his daydreaming.